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45,000 people quit AARP over Medicare

By **MARK SHERMAN**

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WASHINGTON - At least 45,000 people have quit the AARP over its support for Medicare legislation last year, association president William Novelli said Friday.

The nation's largest seniors' organization provided a key boost to Republicans who led the effort to revamp the Medicare program for older and disabled Americans and provide insurance coverage for prescription drugs.

AARP's endorsement unleashed a torrent of criticism from Democratic lawmakers and seniors across the nation accusing AARP of allowing its business relationship with insurers to drive its decision. Novelli has called the criticism baseless.

But AARP officials said many members do not understand the complex legislation and are unhappy with it.

"Somewhere between 45,000 and 49,000 members have resigned their membership essentially in anger over our support for the Medicare legislation," Novelli said at a meeting with reporters at AARP headquarters.

Some of those who quit later rejoined, but AARP doesn't know how many, Novelli said.

Despite the resignations, though, AARP's membership rolls grew last year from 35.2 million to 35.7 million, he said.

The debate over the legislation, which narrowly passed the House and Senate on largely party-line votes, also disrupted AARP's long-standing relationships with leading Democrats.

Novelli said he has yet to talk to Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Another vocal critic, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., has been invited to address the AARP board of directors next month. But a Kennedy spokesman said the senator probably would decline the invitation.

"Our message to them is, let's go forward," Novelli said. "It's all going to happen, but it's going to happen episodically."

One area of agreement would seem to be allowing Americans to import cheaper prescription drugs from Canada. Many Democrats and AARP support it, but the Bush administration has said it has no plans to lift barriers to importation.

"It's definitely not a panacea, but it can help to put some downward pressure on drug prices in the United States," Novelli said.

AARP also said it probably will offer a Medicare-approved drug discount card, another

feature of the legislation, in conjunction with UnitedHealth Group. An existing AARP drug card is used by 2 million members and yields discounts of around 20 percent, officials said.

The new government-approved cards will give \$600 in annual subsidies to low-income seniors who have no drug coverage. The cards will be phased out in 2006, when the prescription drug benefit begins.

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